



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Love Will Guide Us”

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Centering Thoughts

Greater than the breadth of earth and heaven or of waters and fire, You, O Love, are the eldest of all, altogether mighty. To you we pay homage! Atharva Veda

To love our enemy is impossible. The moment we understand our enemy, we feel compassion towards him or her, and he or she is no longer our enemy. Thich Nhat Hanh

There is only one question: How to love this world. Mary Oliver

Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public. Cornel West

Sermon

We recited earlier Mother Teresa’s words that “Love needs to be put into action, and that action is service.” To put love in action through service means we put another’s needs before our own. It means we hold something larger than ourselves more important than ourselves. Mother Teresa’s life exemplified love in action because she devoted her life to helping the least, the lost and the left behind in Calcutta, India. I admire her dedication to love and to her God who called her to love and service.

But sometimes we misunderstand that love. Love in our culture is overly commercialized, sexualized, and trivialized. We only have one word to cover many different types of love, so it’s easy to narrow its meaning or be confused by it. Heaven help us if we seem to advocate for something as ‘icky sweet’ or trite as love.

I think our discomfort with talking about love contributes to some people’s unease with The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King’s use of the term ‘beloved community’. When the Lay Ministers and I were developing a yearly theme, several versions included beloved community. But it became clear that some people react negatively to the word ‘beloved’. Maybe it’s just too icky sweet.

To clarify his meaning, Dr. King outlined six different types of love and ranked them in a sermon titled, “Levels of Love”. Moving from lowest to highest, he named them: utilitarian (has purpose

or motive), maternal (flows from a parent to child), *eros* (romantic or sexual), *philio* (fraternal or friendship), humanitarian (abstract, impersonal recognition of each person's inherent worth or divinity within), and finally *agape* (selfless, giving love that is inclusive, spontaneous, and lacks motive). King understood *agape* love as God operating in the human heart.

Let me further distinguish these last two. Though it sees the divine spark in every person, humanitarian love is less than *agape* because it is earned due to that spark. *Agape* love, on the other hand, flows forth from within because, for King, God is present within and we are graced by God's love, free and unearned. It is this love which forms the foundation of King's beloved community. It is a community filled with selfless love for others. Where we care more about others than ourselves. Where Mother Teresa's love is put into action. That's not icky-sweet.

In King's sermon, he added:

Love is the greatest force in all the world. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my all, and my all. This is our legacy. This is what we have. And may we go on with a love in our hearts that will change us and change the lives of those who surround us. And we will make this old world a new world. And God's kingdom will be a reality.

'Stepping Forward Together' became our year-long theme. But I hope it's understood that we are stepping forward together *towards beloved community*. We aim nothing less than transforming our lives and our community through selfless love. We may reach impossibly high, but better that than no reach at all. I hope the God of Love, the Spirit of Love, and the Spirit of Selfless Giving will flow forth from all our hearts. Love will guide us to the world we want made real.

But don't take only Mother Teresa or Dr. King's words to heart. Our own Unitarian Universalist faith tradition calls us to love and action, as well. Two hundred years ago, in 1815, the Unitarian Reverend William Ellery Channing shared a similar message in his sermon, "Likeness to God." Channing said religion should help us 'become what we praise'. Listen to this passage:

True religion is known by these high aspirations, hopes, and efforts. And this is the religion which most truly honors God. To honor him is not to tremble before him as an unapproachable sovereign, not to utter barren praise which leaves us as it found us. It is to become what we praise. It is to approach God as an inexhaustible Fountain of light, power, and purity. It is to feel the quickening and transforming energy of his perfections. It is to thirst for the growth and invigoration of the divine principle within us. It is to seek the very spirit of God. <http://www.americanunitarian.org/likeness.htm>

Whatever your particular understanding of God, I personally find this passage extremely moving. To slightly broaden Channing's theology, can you feel the quickening and transforming energy of the divine or spirit of love within you? How awesome. I agree with him that religion and worship should foster our own feelings of the heart and the transformative power of love within. In some fashion, I hope we commune with the Spirit of Love within ourselves.

Our UU Seven Principles are all about love. I think love lies at their heart or core. Like King's humanitarian love, our 1st Principle calls us to see and respect the inherent worth, or divine spark,

in every being. This worth is not earned or granted but present in all life, a grace. As in the Hindu expression, *Namaste*, we acknowledge and greet the divine within.

Moving down the principles, several affirm freedom for each person to seek their own path to truth. I think freedom and democracy are not possible without selfless love. The Principles end at the 7th which recognizes our interdependence and interconnectedness, which means the love we act upon, the service we give, expands beyond us and surrounds us. Love flowing from our hearts connects with all the love in the world.

The sociologist Robert Bellah in his book, *Habits of the Heart*, affirms these ideas, too. He writes:

Generosity of the spirit is ... the ability to acknowledge an interconnectedness — one's debts to society — that binds one to others whether one wants to accept it or not. It is also the ability to engage in the caring that nurtures that interconnectedness. It is a virtue that everyone should strive for, even though few people have a lot of it — a virtue the practice of which gives meaning to the frustrations of political work and the inevitable loneliness of the separate self. It is a virtue that leads one into community work and is sustained by such involvements.

It's not just the theologians who know love is a virtue we need more of in the world.

We need love, not anger, not fear, and not hopelessness if we are to end the unjust, unfair, mean-spirited, hate-filled world and replace it with a beloved community. As Buddha, Gandhi, and King proclaimed, hate and violence will not create peace. Only love can.

It doesn't take much to see how unjust and unequal life is in this nation and the world. But I believe love, that transformative power of the divine inside me and you, moves us to act to end injustice. Love makes me dissatisfied with the status quo. Love urges me to know black lives matter and support an end to systemic, institutional racism. Love urges me to support undocumented immigrants whose families are torn apart by deportation. Love urges me to support equal rights in the courts and workplace for lesbian, gay, and transgender people. Love urges me to resist calls for religious freedom that disguise a desire to discriminate.

Love urges me to advocate for Athens-Clarke County to accept refugees from Syria and elsewhere. Love urges me to step forward together, me and you, to create the beloved community. Love calls me to transform our lives and the world.

Whatever fears and anxiety and hopelessness you and I may feel, know that we can overcome them by opening our hearts, by enlarging our hearts, and letting love flow out freely. Love will heal us. Love will heal the world. It is the only thing that can. May we never forget this is so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Has anger or fear about social problems encouraged you to act or withdraw? Please share.
2. Describe a time agape love called you to action. How did you feel after that act?
3. Share what you find most challenging about loving strangers or enemies.
4. How might a community be different if it overwhelmingly tried to 'be love'?